

The National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040

Public Consultation Phase

Submission from Cllr Gerry Warnock, Longford County Council

Introduction

I welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the public consultation on the development of a national plan that I hope will be (a) fit for purpose and (b) provide a framework for a more equitable redistribution of amenities and opportunities for citizens of this nation to enjoy a decent quality of life irrespective as to what part of the country to reside in.

For the purposes of my submission I will focus on Longford and where it could potentially fit in wider regional context. I make absolutely no apologies for the local focus, as I feel that Longford has a strategic role to play in the wider development of both the Midland and Northwest Regions.

The National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 and Learning from that Epic Failure

Although underpinned by good intentions, the NSS was ultimately a failure. Part of the reason was that it tried to be something to everyone but without the logistical wherewithal, political ambition or adequate allocation of funding to realise it.

The idea of Gateway Towns being the nucleus of regional development certainly had merit, but the selection criteria, political interference and above all, a policy that allowed isolated development rendered this model severely flawed and inefficient.

In the Regions, county/provincial towns like Longford that didn't hold Gateway or Hub Status were left behind in terms of infrastructural and economic development. State Agencies such as the IDA and Failte Ireland were drawn towards the chosen ones to the complete detriment to those locked out.

The principal lesson to be learned is that for any plan to succeed it needs to adopt a holistic approach in terms of social and economic development. There must be a net gain for the entire Region. We need to realise that developing one area in isolation of the rest of the Region only ends in deepening the divide in terms of the level of opportunities presented on the road to prosperity – A reinvented “Two-Tier” Economy!

Longford & Developing The Northwest

The beauty of this new plan is that there is now an opportunity to right many wrongs, one of those being the underdevelopment of the Northwest Region. This huge geographical region encompassing all or part of seven counties is essentially Terra Nova in terms of economic potential, especially now with the looming Brexit and the probability of renewed border controls.

By virtue of its geographical location, Longford could potentially be a natural gateway between the region and the rest of the country. Such a potentially important strategic location would certainly require no small amount of national focus in terms of having the required infrastructural needs addressed.

The first focus should be the completion of the M4 between Mullingar and Rooskey. Upgrading this relatively short piece of roads infrastructure would complete the stretch of motorway between Dublin and Sligo.

Longford County Council have already surveyed, identified and mapped a suitable route corridor and have been lobbying TII (former NRA) for many years but they have always been kicked to touch, despite making a detailed business case in terms of Regional Development.

There is an opportunity now to apply logic and open up this underdeveloped part of Ireland through a vibrant Longford Town – The Natural Gateway to the Northwest.

Mid Shannon Wilderness Park – An Eco-Tourism Hub in The Midlands

Longford County Council currently has a proposal to develop a Mid Shannon Wilderness Park in County Longford located between the Royal Canal and Lough Ree on the River Shannon.

Much of the land involved is in State ownership.

The development of such a large amenity park in Longford would provide the Midlands and Ireland with a major tourism attraction of international importance.

The development proposes to combine existing natural amenity areas. These areas include Lough Ree, the Rivers Shannon, Inny and Camlin, the Royal Canal, Newcastle Wood and other forests and the future rehabilitated Bord na Móna bogs.

It is proposed that The Park would be developed in partnership between the various owners particularly Bord na Móna, local communities and Longford County Council.

It is quite feasible that the Longford model could be expanded to take in a larger area to incorporate areas of peatlands and wetlands in Westmeath and Roscommon. The potential is there to develop a unique tourism product to rival the success of the Wild Atlantic Way.

The much anticipated development of Center Parcs at Newcastle Woods reinforces the premise of a very viable Midlands Tourism Hub. At €233m the Center Parcs project is the largest private investment in Tourism in the history of the State and is indicative of the huge potential that exists in this previously unexplored area in the Heart of Ireland.

Much like the previous section, to realize the full potential of this type of project we would require significant focus in terms of financial resources and prioritization in infrastructural development within the Region. I have previously mentioned the roads infrastructure but we would require similar focus in terms of energy and broadband. A spur off the National Gas Network into Ballymahon and particularly Longford Town would offer a real economic benefit. The speedy rollout of the National Broadband Scheme in the Region is also critical to the overall development.

Athlone – The City in The Midlands

I was pleased to learn that a key element of the plan is to direct population growth to regional cities to make them attractive investment destinations and allow for the development of greater public infrastructure.

Such an approach could certainly be a boost to the Regions and help curtail the “brain drain” from rural Ireland towards Dublin and abroad. The policy of clustering most of the employment opportunities within the Dublin catchment has created a huge economic imbalance between Dublin and the rest of Rural Ireland.

I welcome the suggestion of a Midlands City and the logical choice would appear to be Athlone. I believe that such a measure could have a positive impact in terms of Regional access to Third Level Education and increased employment opportunities.

However, the development of Athlone should not be carried out in isolation or else we will replicate the same mistakes made in the National Spatial Strategy. We must not leave the other large urban areas behind and principal towns such as Longford, Mullingar and Tullamore must thrive as a result of developing a Midlands City.

Real Local Government Reform - Devolution of Powers to Local Authorities

One of the most frustrating conundrums I have come across in our efforts to develop as a nation is our continued under utilization of Local Government. Successive governments have continued with the practice of centralization of powers at Oireachtas level, despite this being completely contrary to OECD norms.

Various attempts to wrestle with LG Reform have been dismal at best, the latest effort being the Local Government (Reform) Act 2014, which by and large was a regressive attack on local democracy. The Act has practically made the transition from some semblance of a democratically elected public service provider to a corporate entity with elected members assuming the role of a Board of Directors of an Executive led Local Administration.

This is completely contrary to the premise that local government is the level that is closest to the people that can identify local needs both socially and economically, and have the capacity and autonomy to proceed accordingly. Unfortunately, the ‘one size fits all’ attitude of Departmental hegemony severely restricts our capacity to respond to crisis in an efficient manner required in the modern world. The procrastination of negotiating our way through Departmental procedures and through endless committee meetings is frankly a waste of time that would be better utilized in achieving tangible results on behalf of the people we purport to represent.

It is widely acknowledged that the regressive act of abolishing Town Councils in their entirety has had a detrimental impact on many principal towns in Rural Ireland. Services and growth within these towns have severely diminished and the financial resources and level of focus required to address social and economic needs has been subsumed into the bureaucratic and divisive County Council structure.

In order to succeed in a national framework, particularly one over a term of two decades, the governance of the various work programs must be driven by bodies best able to identify local needs. Local Government has consistently boxed above its weight in rolling out national initiatives (The Gathering 2013, The 1916 Commemorations) despite its statutory limitations.

It is time for a political decision to be taken to apply meaningful reform to the sector. A full suite of powers should be devolved locally which is comparable to OECD norms. A decision should also be taken to reinstate Town Councils in all County Towns and Towns with a population over 10,000. The new Town Councils should have complete autonomy and Local Authority Status and reassume their traditional role of Town Governance.

Local Government holds the key to the development of Rural Ireland, but only if given the freedom to be innovative and independent. Ireland is a small country but is very diverse. What works in one county or region may not work in another. We need to embrace our diversity and not seek to change it by continuing with the "one size does" centralist approach! We need to play to our individual strengths and utilize our local expertise to fulfill our potential.

Conclusion

I am more than enthused that a new beginning for our country is in the offing. I am quite enthused that there is a realization that we have gotten it wrong in the past, and that leads me to live in hope that something good may come from this plan. But we must be brave and innovative in our thinking and we must not flounder under a wave of populism or vested interests.

This plan must be inclusive to succeed. It must lay the foundations for social and economic growth and equal opportunities throughout the island of Ireland, to be enjoyed equally by all our citizens.

Some tough decisions need to be made, and even more admissions of past failures but that's okay if for the common good.

Our country has being through a very difficult decade but we need to ensure that past difficulties have tempered us as a people and have accorded us the wisdom not to make the same mistakes. This document will be a good indicator if we have made that transition.

Yours Sincerely

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